

QATAR 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states Islam is the state religion and sharia shall be “a main source” of legislation. The constitution guarantees the freedom to practice religious rites in accordance with “the maintenance of public order and morality.” The law punishes “offending” Islam or any of its rites or beliefs or committing blasphemy against Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. Sunni and Shia Muslims and eight Christian denominations constitute the registered religious groups in the country. Unregistered religious groups are illegal, but authorities generally permitted them to practice their faith privately. The government continued to censor or ban print and social media religious material it considered objectionable. In July, the government issued administrative deportation notices to four longtime resident Indian-national Christians and their families. The deported individuals attributed the deportations to their religious activities. After closing all mosques and churches in mid-March as part of its measures to combat the spread of COVID-19, the government allowed the reopening of 500 mosques in June and the reopening of other houses of worship and all other mosques in mid-August. In September, the government sent a letter to nearly 150 unregistered religious groups temporarily banning any worship outside the Mesaymeer Religious Complex, which is located on government land and provides worship space for the eight registered Christian denominations, justifying the ban on its efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19 and for security reasons. Sixty-one church villas were slated to open but had not received permission from the government by year’s end. Conversion to another religion from Islam is defined by the law as apostasy and illegal, although there have been no recorded punishments for apostasy since the country’s independence in 1971. The Israeli NGO Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) reported that some particularly offensive material was removed from school textbooks and the “curriculum does not meet international standards of peace and tolerance.” The NGO stated, “Elements of Salafism and Muslim Brotherhood dominate the religious tenor of the curriculum” and “In Islamic religious studies there is very little improvement. Jihad war, martyrdom and violent jihadi movements are praised.”

The Doha branch of Northwestern University cancelled an event by the pro-LGBTQI rock band Mashrou’ Leilaa after the booking created controversy in the country. A faculty member at a private graduate school posted a tweet that criticized Northwestern for its sponsorship of the event, stating that the concert

crossed a “red line” for observant Muslims. In June, the privately owned newspaper *al-Raya* published an article by Khalifa al-Mahmoud, later removed from the daily’s website, which stated that Jews over the course of history had infiltrated international power centers and shaped decision-making, including through the overthrow of governments, to serve their own interests. In his June 25 column in the online newspaper *al-Arab*, Abdallah Abd al-Rahman wrote that secularism was to blame for the “horrific state” of Arab and Muslim societies, stating, “This is one of the gravest forms of treason against the noble Islamic nation, faith and culture....In our Islamic society, secularism represents a position of hostility to Islam and Muslims.”

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet with relevant government bodies as well as with quasigovernmental religious institutions, concerning the rights of religious minorities, Sunni-Shia relations, and anti-Semitism. Embassy officials maintained a dialogue throughout the year with the Ministry of Education (MOE) about newly published Islamic studies textbooks for public school students in grades seven through 12, including a discussion during a December 15 visit by the Special Envoy to Combat Anti-Semitism. In March, the embassy participated in a religious freedom conference among various faiths and academics hosted by the government-funded Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID), which included embassy-funded guest speakers. Throughout the year, the embassy met with various faith communities, including the Hindu, Shia Muslim, Baha’i, and evangelical Christian communities, and the Christian Church Steering Committee (CCSC), which oversees a variety of Christian denominations, to discuss issues of mutual concern. Embassy representatives continued to meet with Ministry of Culture and Sports officials regarding anti-Semitic books being available at the annual Doha International Book Fair.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population as 2.4 million (midyear 2020 estimate). Citizens make up approximately 12 percent of the population, while noncitizens account for approximately 88 percent. Most citizens are Sunni Muslims, and almost all of the remaining citizens are Shia Muslims. Reliable figures are unavailable, but estimates based solely on the religious composition of expatriates suggest Muslims, while they are the largest religious group, likely make up less than half of the total population. The breakdown of the noncitizen population between Sunni, Shia, and other Muslim groups is not available.

Other religious groups, which are composed exclusively of expatriates, include (in descending order of size) Hindus, almost exclusively from India and Nepal; Roman Catholics, primarily from the Philippines, Europe, and India; and Buddhists, largely from South, Southeast, and East Asia. Smaller groups include Anglicans and Protestant denominations, Egyptian Copts, Baha'is, and Greek and other Eastern Orthodox.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and states sharia shall be “a main source” of legislation. According to the constitution, the Emir must be Muslim. The constitution provides for hereditary rule by men in the Emir’s branch of the al Thani family. The Emir exercises full executive power. The constitution guarantees the “freedom to practice religious rites” to all persons “in accordance with the law and the requirements of the maintenance of public order and morality.” It prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion.

Conversion to another religion from Islam is defined by the law as apostasy and is illegal, although there have been no recorded punishments for apostasy since the country’s independence in 1971.

The law provides for a prison sentence of up to seven years for offending or misinterpreting the Quran, “offending” Islam or any of its rites or beliefs, insulting any of the prophets, or defaming, desecrating, or committing blasphemy against Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. The law stipulates a seven-year prison term for producing or circulating material containing slogans, images, or symbols defaming these three religions. The law also prohibits publication of texts provoking social discord or religious strife, with punishment of up to six months in prison.

To obtain an official presence in the country, expatriate non-Muslim religious groups must apply to register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The only registered religious groups are Sunni and Shia Muslims and eight Christian denominations, which are the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic, Maronite, evangelical Protestant, and the Interdenominational Christian Churches. Protestant denominations other than the registered eight denominations, including nondenominational house churches, may register with the government with the support of the CCSC, an umbrella organization consisting of representatives of the eight already registered denominations.

Non-Christian groups must apply for registration through the MFA. Registered groups may hold bank accounts in the organization's name, apply for property to build worship space (or have already built structures, such as private villas, recognized as worship spaces to avoid problems with authorities), import religious texts, and publish religious newsletters or flyers for internal distribution. Unregistered entities are unable to open accounts, solicit funds, worship in private spaces legally, acquire religious texts from outside the country, publish religious-themed newsletters or pamphlets, or legally hire staff.

According to the law, unregistered religious groups (i.e., those not registered or under the patronage of one of the registered groups) that engage in worship activities are illegal, and members of those groups are subject to deportation.

The law restricts public worship for non-Islamic faiths. It prohibits non-Muslim religious groups from displaying religious symbols, which includes banning Christian congregations from advertising religious services or placing crosses outdoors where they are visible to the public. The law criminalizes proselytizing on behalf of an organization, society, or foundation of any religion other than Islam and provides for punishment of up to 10 years in prison. Proselytizing on one's own accord for any religion other than Islam may result in a sentence of up to seven years' imprisonment. The law calls for two years' imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 riyals (\$2,700) for possession of written or recorded materials or items that support or promote missionary activity. The law allows importation of religious holy books, such as Bibles.

The government regulates the publication, importation, and distribution of all religious books and materials. The government reviews, censors, or bans foreign newspapers, magazines, films, and books for objectionable sexual, religious, and political content. Religious groups may publish newsletters without government censorship but may only distribute them internally within their respective communities. To import religious materials, groups must submit one copy to the Ministry of Culture and Sports and receive written approval before making large orders or risk having the entire shipment confiscated.

The only religions registered to have their own places of worship are Islam and Christianity. All mosques and Islamic institutions in the country must be registered with the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA). The law designates the MEIA Minister as the final authority for approving Islamic religious

centers. The MFA approves non-Islamic houses of worship in coordination with the private office of the emir.

The Office of the Secretary General of the MFA, working in coordination with the director of the MFA's Human Rights Department, is responsible for handling church affairs.

A non-Muslim woman is not required by law to convert to Islam when marrying a Muslim; the law considers offspring of such a marriage to be Muslim, however. The law dictates that a non-Muslim man marrying a Muslim woman must convert to Islam.

Islamic instruction is compulsory for Muslim and non-Muslim students attending state-sponsored schools. Non-Muslims may provide private religious instruction for their children at home or in their faith services. All children may attend secular and coeducational private schools. These schools must offer optional Islamic instruction; non-Islamic religious education is prohibited.

A unified civil court system, incorporating sharia and secular law, has jurisdiction over both Muslims and non-Muslims. The unified court system applies sharia in family law cases, including those related to inheritance, marriage, divorce, and child custody. For Shia Muslims, a judicial panel decides cases regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other family matters using Shia interpretations of religious law. In other religious matters, family law applies across all branches of Islam. Non-Muslims are subject to sharia in cases of child custody, but civil law covers other personal status cases, including those related to divorce and inheritance.

Criminal law is based on the principles of sharia. The type of crime determines whether those convicted receive a sharia-based sentence. There are certain criminal charges, such as alcohol consumption and extramarital sex, for which Muslims are punished according to sharia principles, including court-ordered flogging. Sharia-based punishments may also apply to non-Muslims in these cases. The government often commutes harsher punishments mandated by sharia. Muslim convicts may earn a sentence reduction of a few months by memorizing the Quran while imprisoned. Secular law covers dispute resolution for financial service companies. The law approves implementing the Shia interpretation of sharia upon the agreement and request of the parties involved in the dispute.

The penal code stipulates that individuals seen eating or drinking during daylight hours during Ramadan are subject to a fine of 3,000 riyals (\$820), three months' imprisonment, or both.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The government submitted documents to the United Nations in 2018, and made a formal statement in its treaty accession document, that the government shall interpret Article 18, paragraph 2, of the ICCPR (“No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice”) “based on the understanding that it does not contravene the Islamic sharia” and that the government would reserve the right to implement paragraph 2 in accordance with its understanding of sharia. The government also formally stated in its accession document that it would interpret several other provisions of the ICCPR in line with sharia, including Article 27 (regarding the rights of minorities “to profess and practice their own religion”). The government made a formal reservation against being bound by gender equality provisions in Article 3 and Article 23.4 regarding family law and inheritance.

Government Practices

In July, the government issued administrative deportation notifications to four longtime resident Indian-national Christian expatriates and their families. The deported individuals attributed the deportations to their religious activities. Petitions to the government and requests to clarify the decisions were left unanswered.

As part of the government's measures to combat the spread of COVID-19, all churches and most mosques were closed down from mid-March until mid-August. The government allowed the reopening of 500 mosques in June as part of a graduated reopening. (There are an estimated 2,100 in the country.) Although Christian congregations within the Mesaymeer Religious Complex were allowed to resume activities in August, the government sent a letter to nearly 150 unregistered religious groups in September banning any worship outside the complex and asking all house churches to find space inside the already over-crowded complex. In December, the government said 61 congregations out of the 150 under the umbrella of the Evangelical Church Alliance in Qatar (ECAQ) could reopen as a temporary solution until the alliance establishes its permanent premises in the complex. At year's end, however, the 61 churches had not yet reopened, and the MFA had not responded to inquiries by the ECAQ management regarding the government's reopening announcement.

The government continued to state it would consider requests from nonregistered religious groups to acquire a place of worship if they applied to register but, as in previous years, said none had done so.

In a May 6 interview on the Al Jazeera network, Dr. Ahmad al-Farjabi, identified by an NGO as a MEIA sharia expert, said that when a man suspects his wife might become “disobedient” and “rebellious,” he should take the measures prescribed by the Quran, which include beating her. Al-Farjabi added that even Western psychologists have said that wife-beating is “inevitable” in the case of women who had been beaten while they were growing up and for women who have no respect for their husbands. He said that these kinds of women must be “subdued by muscles,” and that some kinds of women “may be reformed by beating.” Al-Farjabi also said that he even heard from women at his lectures that it is preferable to beat one's wife than to allow her to ruin the home and lose her children.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, representatives of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions were unable to follow up on their 2019 visit. During that visit, the UN representatives said there were approximately 26 cases of expatriate women serving prison terms for adultery and five cases of individuals serving time for “sodomy,” behaviors prohibited by sharia.

In its *2020 World Watch List* report, the Christian NGO Open Doors USA stated, “Christians in Qatar, especially converts from Islam to Christianity, remain under extremely high pressure from the government and society – risking discrimination, harassment, police monitoring and intimidation. Even one’s family can be dangerous in a culture that sees conversion as a betrayal. In the Persian Gulf country, Islam is seen as the only acceptable faith, and conversion remains a capital offense. As for church gatherings, while Muslims are free to worship in public, Christians can only worship in private houses or designated places.”

Representatives of the Baha’i community stated that the community faced challenges with 13 cases of longtime (in some cases, lifelong) Baha’i residents who were either prevented from reentering the country or from renewing their residency permits. In 2019, the UN special rapporteur on minority issues and the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion cowrote a letter to the government expressing concern over discriminatory treatment of Baha’is, including in the 13 Baha’i deportation and residency refusal cases, and over the challenges Baha’is faced in registering marriages. The government denied the allegations.

The CCSC continued to meet regularly with the MFA to discuss issues related to its congregants and to advocate for increased space for the large number of parishioners. The MFA also met with unregistered congregations to discuss their interests and needs.

The MEIA continued to hire clerics and assign them to specific mosques. The ministry continued to provide, on an ad hoc basis, thematic guidance for Friday sermons, focusing mainly on Islamic rituals and social values, with clear restrictions against using pulpits to express political views or attack other faiths. The ministry reviewed content but did not require clerics to obtain prior approval of their sermons. The government reserved the right to take judicial action against individuals who did not follow the guidance.

The MEIA continued to remind the public during Ramadan of its view of the correct way for Muslims to perform their religious duties. There were no reports of arrests or fines during the year for violation of the penal code's ban on eating or drinking in public during daylight hours in Ramadan. All restaurants not located in hotels were required to close in daylight hours during Ramadan.

The Saudi Arabian government greatly reduced the number of pilgrims allowed to make the Hajj due to concerns regarding COVID-19. In the previous three years, however, the government had already discouraged citizens and residents from taking part in Umrah and Hajj due to an ongoing dispute with Saudi Arabia that started in 2017 and resulted in the severing of diplomatic ties. Officials at MEIA stated that concerns for pilgrims' security due to the lack of diplomatic representation and coordination with Saudi authorities were behind discouraging citizens and expatriates from performing the Hajj and Umrah.

In a May 16 Al Jazeera interview, Dr. Abduljabbar Saeed, a department chair in the sharia faculty at the state-run Qatar University, cited a *hadith* in which the Prophet Muhammad said that Judgment Day will not come until the Muslims fight the Jews, who will hide behind rocks and trees, which will in turn call upon Muslims to kill the Jews hiding behind them. Saeed referred to a version of the hadith in which a type of tree called a *gharqad* will not call out to the Muslims. He said that he rejected this version and that he believed that every rock and every tree will call out to the Muslims. Saeed said that victory would only be achieved through sacrifice of all that is precious and through the "blood of the martyrs and over the skulls of the enemies."

In August, the Israeli NGO Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) issued a comprehensive interim report on religious textbooks in the country from 2016 to 2020. The report said, “The Qatari curriculum appears to be in a phase of transformation. While somewhat less radical than previous versions, the process of moderation is in its infancy. Some particularly offensive material has been removed after decades of radical propaganda in Qatari schools, but the curriculum does not meet international standards of peace and tolerance.” The report stated, “Elements of Salafism and Muslim Brotherhood dominate the religious tenor of the curriculum.” It added, “In Islamic religious studies there is very little improvement. Jihad war, martyrdom, and violent jihadi movements are praised....Christians are still seen as infidels (*kafirun*) and are expected to go to hell. Some anti-Christian material has been removed. Jew hatred continues to be a central problem for this curriculum, while slightly less widespread than previous iterations. Israel is demonized. Textbooks teach [that] Jews control and manipulate world powers and markets.”

The Anti-Defamation League reported that the government appeared to have eliminated nearly all of the anti-Semitic book titles from the 2020 Doha International Book Fair, provided its online catalogue for the event was still an accurate representation of what was for sale onsite. The NGO described these efforts as “significant improvements” in this area.

Although the law prohibits Christian groups from advertising religious services, Christian churches continued to post hours of services and other information on publicly accessible websites. The government, however, continued to prohibit them from publishing such information in local newspapers or on public bulletin boards. Church leaders and religious groups continued to state that individuals practiced self-censorship when expressing religious views online and relied mostly on word of mouth, church websites, social media platforms, and email newsletters to distribute information about religious groups’ activities.

The government maintained its policy of reviewing, censoring, or banning newspapers, magazines, books, and social media for “objectionable” religious content, such as an attack on Islamic values or depictions of the Prophet Muhammad. Journalists and publishers at times said they practice self-censorship regarding material the government might consider contrary to Islam.

The Mesaymeer Religious Complex, also known as “Church City” and located on government-owned land, continued to provide worship space for the eight registered Christian denominations, with clear government instructions that

Christian symbols such as crosses, steeples, and statues were not permitted on the exterior of church buildings. The Anglican Center within the Mesaymeer Religious Complex housed a number of other smaller denominations and offered space to 88 congregations of different denominations and languages.

According to church leaders, approximately 75,000 to 100,000 expatriate Christians continued to attend weekly services at the Mesaymeer Religious Complex. Citizens of the country and other Muslims were not allowed to attend these services. Representatives of the CCSC continued to state there was overcrowding in seven buildings in the complex, and noted difficulties with parking, access, and time-sharing. In addition to the permanent buildings, the government allowed the churches to erect tents during Easter and Christmas outside of the primary complex to accommodate the extra congregants wanting to attend services during these holidays. The government continued to enforce strict security measures at the complex, including closing parking lots, setting a curfew on church access, and using metal detectors. Ministry of Interior (MOI) security personnel continued to ask churchgoers to show identification at the gates because non-Christians, either expatriates or citizens, continued to be prohibited access to the complex.

Representatives of the Hindu community continued to express concern that the government had not granted Hindus permission to open new places of worship.

The CCSC reported that Christian clergy were allowed to visit members of their congregations when they were hospitalized and to conduct monthly trips to both male and female prisons to meet with incarcerated Christians.

The government prohibited the slaughter of animals outside of licensed facilities, a measure it said was intended to ensure hygienic conditions. In practice, individuals were able to conduct ritual slaughter in private.

Church leaders stated their ability to collect and distribute funds for charity continued to be limited by the government's restrictions on the number and type of bank accounts churches could hold, as well as reporting requirements on donors and on contractors doing business with churches. Some smaller unregistered churches continued to use the personal accounts of religious leaders for church activities.

The government-funded DICID postponed its international religious freedom conference originally scheduled for March due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The country continued to host the headquarters of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), a group widely viewed in the press and academia as being affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Although IUMS stated that it was an independent association of scholars, observers said that its close relationship with the government helps it to serve as an instrument of the country's soft power.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to press reports, the local branch of Northwestern University cancelled an event by the pro-LGBTQI rock band Mashrou' Leilaa, whose booking created a controversy. A faculty member at a private graduate school posted a tweet that criticized Northwestern for its sponsorship of the event, stating that the concert crossed a "red line" for observant Muslims.

On June 3, the privately owned newspaper *al-Raya* published an article by Khalifa al-Mahmoud that was later removed from the daily's website. In the article, al-Mahmoud claimed that Jews over the course of history infiltrated international power centers and shaped decision-making, including through the overthrow of governments, to serve their own interests. Pointing to the Rothschild family as an example, al-Mahmoud said that members of the family spread throughout Europe, taking over economies and profiting from wars. He also stated that the family controls the price of gold, media, and important banks to this day.

In his June 25 column in the online newspaper *al-Arab*, Abdallah Abd al-Rahman wrote that secularism is to blame for the "horrific state" of Arab and Muslim societies. He stated that colonial powers realized that "the idea of exporting the concepts of secularism or of the separation of religion and state to the Arab and Muslim world had no merit and would not last long. [They also realized] that it would expose [their own] ideology, which is hostile to the principles of religion and of the Islamic sharia." Abd al-Rahman continued, "If we regard Islam as a spiritual connection [to God] and nothing else, or as a religion that is confined to the domain of the individual and his personal life, as reflected in his relationship with God – which is what the West or secular Christianity wants – this interpretation would divest the Islamic character of its cultural, educational, and behavioral content.... This is one of the gravest forms of treason against the noble Islamic nation, faith, and culture.... In our Islamic society, secularism represents a position of hostility to Islam and the Muslims...."

In poll conducted by the Arab Center of Washington, D.C. and released in November, 58 percent of respondents in Qatar either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “No religious authority is entitled to declare followers of other religions infidels.” The rate of agreement in Qatar was among the lowest of the 13 regional countries included in the poll, where 65 percent of respondents either strongly or agreed with the statement.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In September, embassy officials met with the MFA, MOI, and the MOE to discuss concerns of the evangelical church congregations following an MOI decision to ban house churches outside the religious complex.

In March, embassy officials attended a religious freedom conference hosted by DICIP, which included embassy-provided guest speakers.

In October, embassy representatives met with leaders from the evangelical Christian community, CCSC, and small Shia community to learn about their ability to freely practice their faiths in the country.

Embassy representatives continued to meet with Ministry of Culture and Sports, MFA, and MOE officials regarding anti-Semitic books being available at the annual Doha International Book Fair. Partially as a result of these discussions, the government did not allow three publishers who sold offensive materials at previous fairs to return. Organizers also did not allow anti-Semitic books sold at the 2019 fair to be sold at this year’s event. Embassy officials maintained a dialogue throughout the year with the MOE about newly published Islamic studies textbooks for public school students in grades seven through 12. In December 15 meetings with senior MFA officials, the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism discussed a newly released NGO report and press coverage on anti-Semitism in the country’s textbooks as well as an invitation from the government for the U.S. government to participate in a government-sponsored interfaith conference in 2021.

Embassy officials continued to facilitate an agreement between the Ministry of Administrative Development, Labor, and Social Affairs and the CCSC to raise awareness among churchgoers about ongoing changes to the labor law, including amendment of the *kafala* (labor sponsorship laws), which affected the expatriate population, and the procedures for submitting complaints to authorities.